



MEDIA RELEASE

STATE OF TENNESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF TOURIST DEVELOPMENT

For Immediate Release
April 6, 2005

Contact: Keith Britt
(615) 741-9010 (office)
keith.britt@state.tn.us

HIGH GAS PRICES MAY INCREASE TENNESSEE TOURISM

Tourists Rate Tennessee First in Affordability Among Key Competitors

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – With gasoline prices climbing through the roof and closing in on a record high, many vacationers may look to stay closer to home this year.

And, Tennessee is sitting pretty. The Volunteer State is situated within a day's drive of two-thirds of the U.S. population, which makes it a popular vacation destination with many locations from which to choose. In fact, new research indicates that travelers consider Tennessee a more affordable destination than many of its competitors including North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia and Missouri.

A new consumer research study by Longwoods International shows Tennessee leading all of its key competitors in affordability and is "just the right distance for a getaway." The study was commissioned by the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development (TDTD) to research the results of its new advertising campaign launched in 2004. Longwoods International is headquartered in Canada.

"In addition to being the leader in affordability, I'm really pleased to see that Tennessee ranked first as an entertainment destination as well as the most unique of all our competitive states," said Susan Whitaker, TDTD Commissioner. "Tennessee is the perfect vacation spot for budget-conscious tourists wanting a lot of fun, entertainment and great memories for their money."

According to AAA, the nation's largest motorist organization, gasoline prices rose Wednesday to an average of \$2.228 per gallon of regular unleaded. The Energy Information Administration reports that this is a jump of 6.4 cents during the past week and a 44-cent increase from one year ago. The EIA reported that gas prices are expected to rise through the Memorial Day holiday.

"The past has shown that when fuel prices are high, people tend to stay closer to home for their vacations," Whitaker said. "We're lucky to be within a day's drive for many Americans, which could generate greater traffic for our region. Also, Tennesseans may tend to vacation in other parts of our state instead of driving farther distances or even flying."

Tennessee prides itself as being a family fun destination. From the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the east to Beale Street and Graceland in the west, the state boasts a number of sites that attract millions of visitors each year.

Statistics from the Travel Industry of America (TIA) show that in recent years almost 80 percent of the population travels by automobile, truck or recreational vehicle. And TIA predicts that Americans plan on taking nearly 281 million (one) person-trips during March, April and May. This represents an increase of 1.2 percent over spring 2004.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park spokesperson Nancy Gray isn't worried about higher gas prices affecting the park's attendance.

(cont.)

“We've seen that when gas prices do go up and other locations were showing large decreases in visitors we saw only a slight decrease because we're family friendly and do not have an entrance fee, so it's affordable for families to travel here for their vacations,” Gray said. “Camping is very reasonable so families could take a less expensive trip to one of their national parks, which offer plenty of culture and natural resources.” Accommodations from big city hotels to quaint bed-and-breakfast inns to camping in the national park are filling up with vacationers looking for a spot to relax closer to home.

Pete Fisher, vice president and general manager of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry House and Opry Museum, feels the issue of rising gas costs is important to him because a majority of his customers drive to Nashville.

“Even during the climate of rising gas prices the tourists that travel to the Grand Ole Opry do drive,” Fisher said. “In fact, for our Tuesday night show we find customers travel a great distance with two-thirds of people traveling from more than 150 miles.”

Pete Owens, public relations manager of Dollywood in Pigeon Forge says with the spike in gas prices in the past has not affected attendance.

“Indicators look like we'll have a very strong year with season pass and pre-season sales, which are up over last year,” Owens said. “The Smokies area has always been a drive to destination and as gas prices go up and it affects car and air travel, historically, it has helped destinations like Sevier County and the Smokies, people will make the drive to the Smokies instead of driving to the coast or Florida.”

Brian Carter, director of marketing and communications with The Memphis Zoo agrees and doesn't think the zoo's attendance will drop when the country is hit with higher gas prices because he feels the zoo “is more of a regional attraction that lends itself to people that may not have the ability to take far away and more expensive vacations.”

Cindy Todd, director of marketing for the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga feels Chattanooga is the perfect place for families to vacation and not have to drain their wallet in order to do so.

“Our \$120 million waterfront plan is scheduled to open May 1, and the aquarium just finished a \$30 million expansion,” Todd said, adding there are many activities to do without spending much money.

Tourism is one of Tennessee's largest industries, employing more than 177,100 individuals and generating nearly \$10.8 billion in direct revenues last year. The state is home to numerous international attractions, including the Grand Ole Opry, Graceland, the Jack Daniel's Distillery in Lynchburg, National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga, the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge, the Memphis Zoo, the Bristol Motor Speedway, and many others.

-end-

For more information on this release and additional Tennessee tourism news, contact:

Keith Britt, TDTD

615-741-9010

keith.britt@state.tn.us

or

Visit – www.tenntravelnews.com

Mike Cohen

Department of Tourist Development News Bureau

(865) 584-2744

